

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

May 12, 2004

The Honorable Anthony J. Principi
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Secretary Principi:

We write you today concerning the inadequacies of your recent CARES decision dated May 7, 2004. Specifically, we speak on behalf of veterans of Northern Indiana in conveying our disappointment with your decision to omit Elkhart County as a future site of a new Community-Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC) for priority implementation. We can attest to the urgent need for expanded health care services for all veterans in Northern Indiana.

The CARES Commission report of February 2004 recognized the shortcomings of the health care options available to veterans in Northern Indiana. The report indicated that at 63 percent, Indiana falls below the 70 percent standard for providing access to primary care within 30 minutes of veterans' homes. By FY 2012, the CARES model projects that the primary care workload will increase significantly in Indiana by 58 percent over the FY 2001 baseline. The proposed closing of inpatient facilities at the Fort Wayne VAMC will only exacerbate the problem. According to the Commission's findings, it recommended the creation of two CBOCs in Northern Indiana to augment the proposed closing of the inpatient services at Fort Wayne. One of the proposed sites was Elkhart County. In your final decision, however, not only did you fail to include a site in Elkhart County on the list of priority CBOCs, you did not adhere to the CARES Commission's recommendation to establish two new CBOCs in Northern Indiana.

Countless veterans in our districts have voiced their displeasure with the current health care system. Independent of the proposed closing of inpatient services at the Fort Wayne VAMC, veterans are increasingly frustrated with access to outpatient services. The South Bend CBOC is the only veterans' clinic located within Indiana's Second District, and it is currently operating over capacity. Complaints about the South Bend clinic include it being overcrowded and too slow, with many veterans complaining of only being able to see their doctor once a year. Veterans are pleading for a new clinic to improve this insufficient access to care.

At the time the CARES report was written, the South Bend CBOC closed enrollment for veterans due to overcrowding. Yet due to overwhelming demand, enrollment was forced to be reopened, even to staff objections that they could not adequately and efficiently serve more veterans. Currently, over 10,000 veterans are served at the South Bend CBOC – with a staff of one doctor, and two nurse practitioners. Three medical staffers cannot adequately staff a clinic serving 10,000 veterans. Staff at the South Bend clinic can attest to this. Clearly, the clinic is understaffed to meet the needs of our veterans in a timely manner.

A new CBOC in Northern Indiana, particularly in Elkhart County would help alleviate the difficulties our veterans face when trying to obtain basic medical care. New CBOCs slated to be established are located in Southern and Central Indiana – which will be of little practical assistance to veterans in Northern Indiana.

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While the CARES Commission's intent to streamline the veterans' health care system is laudable, if we fail to provide adequate and timely access to health care for our veterans, we are failing in our mission. Because Northeast Indiana was ignored when creating the list of priority CBOCs, I ask that you reconsider including a CBOC in Elkhart County for priority implementation.

Additionally, it is unclear why Elkhart County was not selected as a priority CBOC. In your CARES decision, you cite 5 criteria for prioritization. Several of these criteria would seem to apply to Elkhart County, including rural classification, an association with the realignment of a major facility (Fort Wayne), and a need to address the workload of an existing overcrowded facility (South Bend). Please provide us with an explanation as to why your recent CARES decision did not recommend a CBOC in Elkhart County as originally proposed by the CARES Commission. What objective criteria were used to determine which CBOCs were approved and which ones were not; and what were the deciding factors in making the recommendation to not prioritize a CBOC in Elkhart County? It is our hope that we can work together to address these inadequacies and provide the care our veterans truly deserve. We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Chris Chocola
Member of Congress



Mark Souder
Member of Congress